

Vices - Lust

I'm not too sure how I ended up with the vice of lust. I can't really blame anyone because I was the one who wrote the outline for Lent. I guess I just brought it on myself, which is a little like lust in some ways. Lust, "they say," you have no one to blame but yourself and your lack of control.

I remember growing up in Richmond Baptist youth group and the struggles I had with lust as a teenage boy. Which looking back on it shouldn't have been such a problem – it was only natural. But it was one of those things that caused me a lot of grief and guilt. The more I tried to fight it the harder it fought back.

And as we know the church is pretty uptight when it comes to sex. My attraction to girls was a problem and I didn't really have much guidance as to how to handle things, other than try to stop thinking about it. Easier said than done. The harder I tried, the harder it got. I wish I had better advice. I wished the church spoke about a person's sexual makeup better.

The main party line most of us know is that sex for marriage and with the opposite sex. Anything else is bad... very bad. And when Jesus said if your eye causes you to sin, perhaps it is a good thing we don't take the Bible too literally, because there could be a few one-eyed church members around the place.

On the whole we don't, as a church, like talking about sex do we? We kinda feel embarrassed. We don't know where to look. And we kind of whistle looking the other way until things are clear again or settle down. I bet many people haven't heard many sermons on the Songs of Songs. Heck, I didn't read the book until I was very old – breasts and pomegranates, clusters of fruit and marble pillars... phew! Is it getting warm in here?

Part of the issues we have with the present discussion on human sexuality – i.e. homosexuality – is because it is to do with sex. People usually don't have a problem with same-sex people living together platonically. But if there is sex involved it changes everything. For such a small part in the life of people, it sure takes a large slice of our energy. Although heterosexual couples who have been married for a while know that sex isn't the be all and end all of a good marriage. Sure, it does have an important part in the relationship, but there are usually other things far more important – like commitment and love, security and honesty, and taking out the rubbish without being nagged... asked.

But then again sex is like some kind of explosive power (excuse the pun) that changes everything between couples. There is the possibility for it to produce life – but not often. I don't know the percentage of procreation and recreation with sex. But my thinking is that actual babies produced is a low percentage. This connection is intimate and the Bible says it is even spiritual, mystical and not to be taken lightly. It is a gift that has great potential for enjoyment and indeed sorrow.

The Church sees that marriage is the best place for sex, because what sex brings into a relationship is powerful and vulnerable and influential and enjoyable. But just as much as it can draw two people closer it can also bring complications and heart break. It is why we don't condone sleeping around, adultery, pornography, etc. The damage it creates not only to individuals but also society is significant.

Lust is like all the other vices we are looking at during Lent. God created things in this world to enjoy – food, possessions, emotions, and yes sex. The vices come about when these things are abused. When they are used in ways they weren't intended for. Food is great. It is useful for staying alive, staying healthy, enjoying life. But used wrong it can cause all kinds of problems. The same is true with lust.

Now it is a good thing to be attracted to someone – especially one's spouse. It helps, doesn't it? When that attraction fades problems begin to arise. Those little annoying habits become unbearable, unliveable. And soon a person either gives up on enjoying their marriage or they look for alternatives to find their fulfilment. So desiring, yearning and longing for someone isn't a bad thing in itself. Unless it is directed in the wrong direction – towards the wrong person. And the thing is that these emotions are very powerful and very

subtle. It is why we need to be so careful, lest we fall into a black hole. And we know enough stories, both near and far, of people who have succumb to such a vice and the consequences we know are often tragic.

So while it is good to be attracted to the right person, there is the danger that we become attracted to the wrong person as well. No one is immune. There is the danger that our emotions or our longings lead us down a wrong pathway. And it can be very subtle. It can take time. It can take us to the place of no return. It is why it is so important that we need to be careful about the things we do, the choices we make, the things we entertain in our mind, the things we keep ourselves from.

I think of it like playing at the top of a playground slide. At the top we're OK. But once we start edging over the top down the slide it doesn't take much before we find ourselves at the bottom. And trying to stop halfway down is nigh impossible – particularly if we think we are having so much fun. But more often than not we come to the bottom and end with a sudden bump and we drop off the end. The ride is over and we can't undo what happened.

It starts with a second look, a pondering, an imagining with possibilities... She looks nice... I wonder what he thinks of me... I wonder what it would be like to know her better... She's fun to be around, we have so much in common, He makes me really happy... I wonder what it would be like to touch her... and so on.

Perhaps the church not talking about sex has caused it more problems. Denial is seldom a helpful tactic in dealing with life's issues. And God and our faith isn't about ignoring who we are or how we work. Understanding ourselves truthfully is much healthier. Life is about celebrating the desires and pleasures of life. In a way that is healthy and life-giving; not selfish and damaging. The desire to find pleasure through unrestrained pleasure seeking can be as detrimental as denying ourselves God-given pleasures of life. Both screw people up and we all know such people and indeed we ourselves may be these people. Heck I know I can relate to this.

Misguided guilt and shame in the name of spirituality is a blight on our faith. The Song of Songs shows how our faith celebrates the intimacy of good attraction and desire and passion. When Adam first saw Eve wasn't he blown away? When you met the love of your life didn't your heart leapt? And when over the years through ups and downs, commitment and fidelity, didn't your love grow even deeper and more profound?

DeYoung's book says Perhaps the greatest danger is that lust begins as a weakness, not malice. Perhaps they have a low self-esteem, perhaps they crave more attention or appreciation, perhaps they simply are tired of playing it safe and want some excitement...

People get carried away by curiosity or strong desire. People don't plan to be hurtful or awful, to create lifelong scars for themselves and those closest to them. They simply get caught up in the moment and it gets out of control. We need to appreciate that sexual desire is a natural and powerful and beautiful thing. And it is understandable that we underestimate their force and hold before it is too late.

So what do we do about all this? We can't bury our head in the sand. We can't deny the God-given makeup of our nature. How do we ensure we enjoy the good things of life and withstand the bad?

At the root of this vice is self-fulfilment. Perhaps it closest vice is gluttony. Food without nourishment and sex without humanness. Physical pleasure without true appreciation. It is the habit of trying to engineer my own happiness on for myself, on my own terms. In lust, my own pleasure is the goal – my life revolves around me, my desires, my wants and "needs". And there is a definite sense of pleasure gained, but it is an illusion. In doing so I distant myself from God's love and the love of others. I see what I can get over what I can give. It is more about receiving than giving. But the problem is this – nothing you get will be enough. It becomes a never ending monster that needs constant feeding and in the end we become its victim. This monster will never be satisfied.

The paradox is this – the more we try to attain pleasure for ourselves, the less likely we will find it. The more we can truly put others first, without strings attached, the deeper the real pleasure we will find. This is how God created us to have a good fulfilling life.

We are sexual beings. We crave the closeness of others (usually). Intimacy is a gift. And underlying all this is our deep need for self-fulfilment. To be loved. To be accepted. To be valued. To feel worthwhile. But to truly love another there is a need for this to come from a place within us that is healthy. A place that can give of oneself just as much as we can receive for ourselves. A place that can value another and ourselves. And if we aren't healthy we need to get help – we need to help ourselves because we are worth it.

And perhaps the greatest aspect of all these things is that we do have a choice. We are not victims. We have options how to live our life. Sure there are times when we may need help and support. Especially when we have made bad decisions or find ourselves in dark places. But in Christ there is always hope and there is always salvation. There will be times when we fail. There are times when the hurts of others impact us deeply. But there is healing and wholeness. However the answers will not be found in the vices that are so tempting. These vices promise the world and only give dirt. They will only increase the pain we try to deal with.

The Bible, our faith shows us a way to true life, to true fulfilment. It takes faith and it definitely takes commitment. We cannot fake it, or play at it. God sees our hearts. But the results are fantastic and good – they are God-given. And we need to acknowledge that sometimes finding this wholeness takes time and effort and support, help. It's not an overnight solution. But having the right mind-set and having the right out-look and having the right self-image and self-worth will give us what we truly desire in this life.

Lust, like all the vices is a subtle powerful force in the lives of people. But the power of God is greater. And God's wholehearted desire is love for us, life for us – wholeness; fulfilment. So perhaps it is a good thing to be more open about who we are. Perhaps it is a good thing to talk better about our sexual drives, rather than thinking it is some kind of foreign monster lurking in the corners – or the elephant in the room.

God created us a certain way and living this certain way will give us the greatest joy peace and happiness.